

Hearns: Define your own destiny **Success, service focus of summit at Knight High** *This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press Friday, March 14, 2008. By JULIE DRAKE Valley Press Staff Writer*

PALMDALE - Lancaster Mayor Henry Hearns on Thursday urged about 400 students at Knight High School to define their own destiny.

Hearns was the keynote speaker at the school's Teen Summit, themed "Knight Hawks Soaring Towards Success." The daylong conference was co-sponsored by the Antelope Valley Human Relations Task Force and Antelope Valley Union High School District.

Darren Parker, president of the task force, and Emmet Murrell, who is the executive director for Knight's Violence-Free Zone, also spoke. Hearns spurred students to get involved in their community and to be ready to serve. "Make a decision and stay on course," he said. "I hope you've got your stuff together because, ladies and gentlemen, there's nothing out there that you can't do, except you've

got to live together." Hearns also urged students to define themselves and not let other people do it for them. Parker, who grew up in Compton, said his life changed when an adult took an interest in him. "My life is dedicated to others because someone decided my life is worth something," he said. Murrell talked about racial ignorance, finding out about himself and the Violence-Free Zone. "I don't think that we have a right to allow anyone on campus that's going to prevent anyone from learning," he said. Through the Violence-Free Zone, Murrell said he hopes to show students the importance of an education. The speakers were a hit with their audience, generating waves of loud applause throughout the approximately 45-minute opening ceremony.

"I really liked all the speeches," said freshman Jovana Garcia, 14, adding the summit was a good idea. Garcia's friend, freshman Samantha Bermudez, 15, agreed and said she learned something. "We need to change the way that we are and not be so racist with other people ... everybody is the same." Freshman Brenda Meiorada, 15, said for teens to have someone to talk with about their problems is nice. After the morning session the students were excused to attend a series of breakout sessions. In psychology teacher Tina Kaveny's classroom, Jean Varden, a volunteer with the Antelope Valley Alternatives to Violence Project, put juniors through a session to teach them about communication. In two circles, the students took turns answering different questions and listening to one another.

Varden, a retired educator, praised her chance to participate in the summit. "I think it's a great opportunity," she said. "I really believe in this model of learning by talking to each other and learning about yourself and learning about other people that way, rather than being talked at."

Junior Tessa Lane, 16, said she thought the exercise was fun, adding that she learned to listen when people talk to her.

This is the eighth year the high school district and the task force have sponsored teen summits, which alternate among the different schools, said Parker, who helped organize the first one.

Thursday's event was the fifth Teen Summit of the school year and the first at Knight High. "It was actually one of my dreams from a time long ago," Parker said. "When I was a kid I always wanted to tell adults what I thought, and the Teen Summit gives kids the opportunity. The only way you can truly learn what's going on with students is to ask them and then feel confident enough to give them information that you can act on."

He added that the way the summits are designed, community leaders and guests who attend them are the people who can make things happen.

Susan McDougal, principal of Knight High, said the forum provided a chance for students to interact with community leaders.

"We wanted to have the kids focused on their future," she said. With that in mind, the school invited, among others, a financial planner, counselors to help students with financial aid paperwork for college, Regional Occupational Program counselors and representatives from the city to explain how to be a good employee.

"We want students to pick on a future; when you leave here, what's your plan? The idea is to plan your future; otherwise it will happen to you."